

EU has a key role in fostering social success

"The EU has a significant role to play in fostering social success" is the message set forth by Vladimír Špidla, Commissioner for Employment, Social Affairs and Equal Opportunities at the two-day conference on 'Responding to new social realities' taking place in Brussels today. The event, bringing together all EU and national players, sets the stage for a new Communication on the EU Agenda for Opportunities, Access and Solidarity, planned for June 2008.

"The European Union must continue to participate and succeed in a rapidly globalising world. For us to succeed socially, to be competitive, and to have a vibrant economy, we must retain and attract skilled and talented people. Most importantly, we need to ensure that the EU is an attractive place in which to live and work, with a resilient and inclusive society", said Commissioner Špidla.

One of the starting points of the Conference is the Social Agenda¹ adopted in 2005 which set out the EU's roadmap for modernising the European social model: "A social Europe in the global economy: jobs and opportunities for all". The Social Agenda forms part of the integrated European approach towards growth and jobs known as the Lisbon Strategy.

The Lisbon Strategy has helped to speed up reform and raise the EU's performance, with 17 million new jobs created since 2000. Millions of Europeans have seized the opportunities offered by the single market to live, study, work or retire in another Member State. The EU has put in place a robust framework of workplace rights. But there is no room for complacency.

16% of Europeans, including 19 million children, remain at risk of poverty. Women's pay continues to lag behind men's by 15%. And new challenges have emerged. Rapid technological change is widening the gap between the skilled and unskilled. Socio-economic factors are the cause of major health inequalities. Social protection and health systems have to adapt to demographic change and the needs of the EU's ageing population. The difficulties that young people face, including access to jobs and affordable housing, have raised fears that today's generation of young Europeans may not enjoy the same standard of living as their parents.

¹ http://ec.europa.eu/employment_social/social_policy_agenda/social_pol_ag_fr.html

Against this background, the Commission launched an EU-wide “Social Reality Stocktaking” exercise in 2007². The consultation aimed to take stock of the changes underway in European societies. A broad range of views on current social trends, as well as on the implications of changing social relationships has emerged. Building on the initial results of the consultation, the Commission adopted a Communication on Opportunities, Access and Solidarity in November 2007³ which sets out an initial range of possible responses to the challenges faced by the European Union.

Today's Conference on responding to new social realities will provide a platform to Member States, European institutions, social partners, civil society and experts to discuss current social trends and to contribute to the development of a renewed EU agenda based on “Opportunities, Access and Solidarity” to be adopted by the Commission in June 2008.

The Conference will be opened by Vladimír Špidla, Commissioner for Employment, Social Affairs and Equal Opportunities and closed by President Barroso.

Over 350 delegates attending the conference will have the chance to:

- learn about opportunities and challenges faced by the European citizens in a changing world and innovative solutions to new social risks;
- connect with leading authorities from the European Union and overseas;
- engage with stakeholders and other actors active in the social field;
- stimulate discussion and debate on topical issues affecting European citizens.

The conference will be structured around three working groups:

- New policy responses to changing challenges
- A changing configuration of roles and responsibilities of actors
- The role of the EU in delivering opportunities, access and solidarity.

Further information:

The two plenary sessions in the morning of the 5 May and in the afternoon of 6 May will be webstreamed on the following link:

<http://scic.ec.europa.eu/streaming/char>

Additional information on the conference, including background and supporting documents, is available at:

http://ec.europa.eu/employment_social/emplweb/social_agenda/ec_conference_en.html

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http://ec.europa.eu/citizens_agenda/social_reality_stocktaking/docs/background_document_en.pdf

³ http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/site/en/com/2007/com2007_0726en01.pdf